

# **Burn Down the Psych Ward**

**call for an abolitionist approach to psychological emancipation**

PERA

2019

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The American plantation relies on the mental distress of those it oppresses. As revolutionaries, we seek the liberation of people in bondage, both in prisons and psych wards. In order to eliminate patriarchy, capitalism, gender, and anti-blackness, we must address the significant psychological damage these forces inflict.

The trauma caused by social isolation, psychological manipulation and physical oppression is felt by all of those who are locked up, enslaved and otherwise targeted by the barbaric enforcers of white supremacy. The rampant psychological distress we are accustomed to is the effect of living in a depraved world. It is not possible to address “mental illness” without addressing the overwhelmingly reactionary nature of American society.

Psychological Emancipation for Revolutionary Abolition seeks to create ways of dealing with psychological distress which build up the revolutionary relationships that are needed to help people stay free. We must not only be supporting our fellow revolutionaries in their time of psychological need, but developing the patterns and practices of social cohesion that create strong bonds more capable of withstanding state repression, dealing with psychological distress, and undertaking militant action.

The skills, ideas and methods of organization proposed in this call for a revolutionary abolitionist approach to psychological emancipation will be useful to anyone seeking to overcome the psychological barriers to securing their own liberation, but the ultimate goal of PERA is to destroy locked psychiatric treatment, prisons, and the state itself. This means that to truly succeed PERA requires support from and coordination with a broader abolitionist network, the Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement.

This call for a revolutionary abolitionist approach to psychological emancipation is structured around three pillars, each related to a different aspect of active struggle against psychological distress.

## **Three Pillars of PERA**

- Psychological Emancipation
  - Learn psychological skills which can help us become better revolutionaries.
- Revolutionary
  - Develop psychological affinity groups to support one another, as we face psychological distress.
- Abolition
  - Destroy the current system of mental health care, which holds mentally ill people against their will in both prisons and psych wards.

## **Psychological emancipation**

Psychological self defense is a necessary part of revolutionary struggle, and psychological skills are necessary for withstanding the challenges all revolutionaries face. To bring our unique talents and individual experiences to the struggle for liberation, we must remove the psychological roadblocks that hinder our effectiveness.

Living on the American plantation is psychologically damaging, and being mentally ill here can be physically damaging, or deadly. The carceral state extends to our ways of treating mental

illness; from the mentally ill in traditional jails and prisons, to those in locked psych wards, the end of this prison state must include straitjackets as well as shackles.

In traditional mental health treatment, success is most often measured by how well people are able to fit into the expectations of society. For PERA, instead the goal is to provide the psychological tools necessary for revolutionaries to fight for our own freedom.

To build a world without oppression, we must kill the master within, and harden our minds against the assaults of the state and capitalism. In order to grow as a revolutionary movement, we need to support comrades who are facing the psychological effects of this prison society. Psychological affinity can form a basis for building up revolutionary capacity. Not only can we help one another through periods of crisis or distress, but we can form strong relationships based on shared values and emancipatory goals. This isn't just something that will have a positive effect on our lives in the immediate moment; it is a chance to build the kinds of connections that can withstand the force of oppression.

We must start with a recognition of the social and political forces which cause some of the most unpleasant forms of psychological distress. The conception of mental illness as rooted in only genetics, or pure chemical imbalance is unfounded. Depression and anxiety are natural reactions to the isolating effects of capitalism. For black people, and others targeted for control and enslavement, this feeling is multiplied by the trauma of white supremacist terror. The psychological pain that people feel is alleviated not primarily through medicine or therapy, but through the creation of a social environment that will allow us to become better revolutionaries.

Though techniques for dealing with certain emotions or unpleasant thoughts are important and useful, we need systems of social support to attain the freedom we're looking for. We seek to transform the way we relate to each other and to create groups capable of eliminating our oppressors.

## **Revolution**

We are specialists in psychology and novices alike, we have experienced mental illness personally or peripherally. Our skills and our backgrounds differ, but our autonomy, and revolutionary goals are the same.

PERA is focused on developing a model of psychological affinity, developing a non-hierarchical mode of treatment for psychological distress, and providing people with resources necessary to seek their own psychological emancipation. While specialization of knowledge is useful, authority over the treatment of "patients" is inherently hierarchical and destroys the very autonomy and control over one's life that psychology claims to give.

There is no prescriptive guide or single analysis that can bring liberation. We don't presume to have found a final answer for how to deal with the psychologically distressing experiences that are inherently part of living in a society we seek to destroy. Instead we want to propose a set of tools and methods that will not only help us strike back against the psychological assaults of capitalist society, but will also address the underlying social factors that are at the root of mental illnesses.

Both on a social and individual level, we are taught that the "solution" to a negative emotion or phenomenon is control or avoidance. In our families histories of mental illness are coded secrets. People are often unwilling to talk about what they are experiencing psychologically due

to stigma. We are conditioned to think of illness and addiction as personal weaknesses. Rather than representing an innate flaw, “mental illness” is a product of the society we live in, and a label used to imprison those who do not reliably follow orders, or create profit for the capitalist machine.

## **Abolition**

Anti-black policing often criminalizes the mentally ill, enslaving people, rather than providing support. A staggering number of people are murdered by police during mental health crises, and prisons are overflowing with people suffering from mental illness, often compounded by their experience behind prison walls. “In 44 states, a jail or prison holds more mentally ill individuals than the largest remaining state psychiatric hospital; in every county in the United States with both a county jail and a county psychiatric facility, more seriously mentally ill individuals are incarcerated than hospitalized. A 2004–2005 survey found there were “more than three times more seriously mentally ill persons in jails and prisons than in hospitals.”

This slavery is possible because of the societal attitude that mental illness is a personal failing. After mass shootings rather than confronting patriarchy and white supremacy, we scapegoat mental illness. In the case of the Parkland shooting media was more vocal about the need to imprison the mentally ill than the swastikas engraved on the shooter’s gun. Those in power will never blame the fundamental anti-blackness, patriarchy, and alienation that define American society, because they are the ones who benefit from and uphold these forces.

In Nazi concentration camps a black triangle was used to mark prisoners as “asocial” or “*arbeits-scheu*” (work-shy). This applied to people unable to participate in the production of Nazi wealth, be they disabled, or mentally ill. This label, work-shy, gets to a fundamental aspect of the societal attitude towards mental illness. The only difference between the experience of the mentally ill in traditional prisons and in the locked psych wards is a slightly greater chance of escape or clemency (if one is willing to subject oneself to the rules of society and the necessity of work).

Instead of accepting seclusion and imprisonment we have to become capable of fighting back against the distress that wracks our minds, and the society that creates these deep psychic rifts. Reformism only perpetuates and strengthens the existing mental health system. Instead we propose a revolutionary approach. We cannot solve this social problem without addressing the society that created it. There is no way to truly reform a system so rotted at its foundation. We don’t want to reform American society; we want to destroy it.

Only through this destruction can we create social and physical structures of support that build trust and solidarity rather than obedience and conformity. This social change is the real point of our revolutionary vision; we have to look at our actions and analysis from the context of abolition: abolition of locked wards, of the state, and of hierarchy in all its forms.

The traditional methods for treating mental illness serve to reinforce false assumptions about what mental illness is and what its causes are. The societal nature of psychological distress is roundly ignored. Instead therapy is usually founded in the same reasoning that justifies many other hierarchies. Participation in society, regardless of its brutality towards you, is the goal of mental health treatment.

Therapists judge progress based on your ability to live within capitalism, regardless of your desire to do otherwise. These tendencies are fundamental parts of the therapies themselves, and are dominant in society. Even their personal separation, through their professional status and the inherent hierarchy of therapist-patient relationships creates an environment where the true trust and support needed by the person seeking help is compromised from the start.

## **Burn down the Psych Ward**

The ambitious goal of PERA is to create a system for responding to psychological problems which can replace the oppressive system that currently exists. This goal is difficult, but it is not impossible. The inadequacy and oppression of mental health “treatment” leaves a vacuum for the creation of new approaches. PERA aims to make a revolutionary change in the way we deal with mental illness.

In pursuit of our three pillars of Psychological Emancipation, Revolution, and Abolition, we are focusing on securing psychological emancipation to bring about abolition of the state and the psych ward.

We will meet these goals by:

- Creating psychological affinity groups built to fight back against the mental health imprisonment system.
- Developing personal and collective skills to improve our psychological state
- Destroying the prevailing approaches to mental illness, and creating an abolitionist approach to psychological distress.

The seeds of madness, of dissolution of self, of grief, trauma and depression, are in all of us. To fully prevent them from growing to strangle us, we only have one option: destroy the psychological system that pathologizes and imprisons those who do not fit the norms of a barbaric society.

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